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中国人大学生に対するアメリカ文学教育における文化的障害の克服

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(英　語)

Overcoming Cultural Barriers to Teaching American Literature to Chinese College Students

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HYPOTHESIS

Scholars have long acknowledged the close link between language and culture. The recent sociolinguistic theory which makes the larger claim that "Language IS culture" has been consistently confirmed by the findings of researchers in many fields from linguistics to anthropology. If that equation is indeed accurate, then literature by extension can be called a kind of "crystallized culture," since it is in fact language set down in a fixed, artistic form for readers present and future. It would therefore stand to reason that a teacher faced with the task of teaching literature in a completely different culture would find many of the same cultural barriers that inhibit language-learning, and that was indeed my experience during my two-year stay teaching English language and literature to Chinese college students in training for the diplomatic corps at the Foreign Affairs College of Beijing from 1986-1988.

Surprisingly, the students struggled even harder with cultural barriers in the literature class than they did in the straight language classes, leading me to posit a theory that there exists a "cultural interference" in acquiring the literature of another culture just as we speak of an "L1" or "first language" interference to the acquisition of a second language. The "acquisition" of a second literature poses just as many mysteries and anomalies to the literature student who has already acquired the language and literature of his own culture as a second language to the language learner. In the conviction that this comparison and my experiences will be of interest to literature and language scholars, cross-cultural specialists, East Asian studies investigators, and anyone else with an interest in cross-cultural communication, I present the following documentation, a

description of how my Chinese students came to "acquire" a second literature, in this case British and American literature, by overcoming certain cultural interferences. I would also like to say at the outset that while I sometimes refer to "Western Literature" in general terms, I realize it has many branches other than American and British letters.

INTRODUCTION

By way of introduction, some background information on the teaching situation, the school and classroom venue, the materials used, and the students themselves is in order.

I arrived at the Foreign Affairs College in Beijing, the People's Republic of China, on September 1, 1986, to teach English language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) to the first- and second-year students and literature to the junior class. My training included a B.A. in Comparative Literature, a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics (TESOL), another M.A. in folklore, and a Ph.D. in folklore (American culture) with a linguistics minor. I initially signed a one-year contract but ended up staying for two years, the most enjoyable part of that time being the two semesters that I taught English and American Literature to half of the junior class, some forty students in all. During those two semesters my students and I embarked on a cultural adventure that kept us guessing and learning together, from the first day to the last, and presented each day a new challenge, as described below.

THE STUDENTS

The two classes were composed of close to twenty students each, all ranging between the ages of nineteen and twenty-one. They were in the midst of their third year of a four-to-six year program, depending on whether or not they intended to pursue a career in the foreign ministry. Nearly all of them had parents who were professionals of some kind and who were also well-placed in the communist party, a must for being accepted at such a politically strict school as the Foreign Affairs College. My students were uniformly bright, some of them exceptionally sharp, and a few of them nothing short of brilliant, a delight for any teacher. The classes met for two fifty-minute sessions with a ten-minute break in-between, and composed part of a rigorous week for the students of twenty-five to thirty class-hours per week. During our two hours together, in the beginning there were days of enormous frustration and even amazement as I came to

recognize the barriers that were keeping my students from appreciating, or even understanding, the literature of the West, and some deeply entrenched notions on their part and mine had to be uprooted before true communication could set in.

MATERIALS AND SYLLABUS

The literature class lasted for a full academic year, and the year I taught it consisted of British Literature for the first semester and American Literature for the second semester, with the semesters lasting about sixteen weeks each. For the first semester I taught English literature, and was required to use a specified text because a Chinese colleague was teaching the other two junior classes the same subject, and we were requested to use the same book. The book we were assigned was composed of selections in English literature, an extraordinary volume composed of short passages torn from major English novels, presented out of context. The students were frustrated by this text because they often had no idea of what happened in the story before or after the passage in question, and I was frustrated by the politically biased introductions and poor quality of the notes. What could even a talented student who was a native-speaker of English glean from a single chapter of *Adam Bede*, for example? The students did manage to get some good discussions going despite the barriers though, using the methods that will be described below.

For the second semester, however, I was free to design my own syllabus on American Literature, and since no text was assigned I was also completely free to choose my own materials. I selected short stories and poems because of the students' complaints about reading incomplete materials and because they could be easily read during a week despite the students' demanding class schedule. We also looked at some short dramatic pieces.

For those familiar with American literature, the following list gives an indication of our readings. The materials below were selected partly for length, partly for their points of contrast, and partly to provide a variety of different authors, male and female, black and white, and a variety of writing styles, as well as to represent a variety of regions of the United States. Also, most of them are twentieth-century authors:

Short Stories

Stephen Crane, "An Episode of War"

Sherwood Anderson, "Departure"

John Steinbeck, from "Travels with Charley"
Toni Cade Bambara, "Happy Birthday"
William Carlos Williams, "The Use of Force"
Mark Hager, "Good Morning"
John Updike, "The Family Meadow"
Dorothy Canfield Fisher, "The Bedquilt"
James Thurber, "A Time for Flags"
O. Henry, "The Last Leaf" and "After Twenty Years"
Grace Paley, "Samuel"

Drama
Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*, Epilogue

Poetry
Claude McKay, "America"
Edwin Arlington Robinson, "Cliff Klingenhagen"
Thomas Wolfe, "Something Has Spoken to Me in the Night"
Emily Dickinson, "The Lightning is a Yellow Fork"
Robert Frost, "The Black Cottage"

The above list is by no means exhaustive, or even representative, of the extent of American literature, but a sixteen-week semester with only one two-hour class per week puts certain limits on the amount of ground the class can cover, especially a class struggling hard to understand the literature of a culture so different from its own. I will focus for the most part on our efforts to acquire American literature.

THE BARRIERS

The task of making American literature accessible to Chinese students could not be tackled all at once. In my ignorance I did try at the beginning to introduce stories with a quick word about the author, a cursory cultural gloss, then assign them as reading and await with anticipation the next week's responses. But the students could not respond, because their background was too limited. The cultural assumptions about the basic reader's exposure to Western civilization and its various components such as Judaism,

Christianity, British and American history, and American values, family life, town life, just were not there and could not be transferred by a single introductory lecture. Moreover, students could not interpret what they could not understand, or respond to what they could not interpret. So our odyssey together developed in three stages: first, overcoming barriers to COMPREHENSION, then to INTERPRETATION, and lastly, to RESPONSE. I will expand on each of these stages below.

COMPREHENSION

The problems my students faced in understanding American literature were due to lack of background about Western civilization, American life, the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and also the heritage of American literature as shaped by the tradition of its authors from the beginning of the nation's history to today. Each of these problems had to be tackled before comprehension could take place.

Given my own ignorance of Chinese language, culture, and literature, I should not have been surprised at the complete lack of understanding of my students to the simplest aspect of American life. The details of daily life that bring a short story to life for the American reader sounded like gibberish to many of my students. Also, the meaning conveyed to the reader by the author in the selection, say, of a character's name, was lost on students from another culture. The background of Judaeo-Christian values which bring a story such as "The Last Leaf" to life was completely unknown to them, as were the assumptions and underpinnings of Western culture that place emphasis on the individual and and on personal satisfaction and achievement, so essential to understanding Steinbeck's "Travels with Charley," for example.

Unfortunately, the barrier to understanding was helped rather than hindered by the very poor cultural notes in some of their literature texts, which were overburdened with political innuendo where none was required, and in some cases contained information that was just plain inaccurate. For example, under the line in Wordsworth's sonnet, "Earth hath not anything to show more fair," in which the poet writes while looking out on London, "My God, the very houses seem asleep!" the note reads "This shows the poet's awakening feelings for God," where in fact "My God" is used in this case completely as an expression of emphasis and has absolutely no religious connotation whatsoever.

But despite lack of exposure to Western Civilization and American daily life, and the poor notes, the barrier to comprehension proved to be the easiest to cross. By giving a

detailed pre-lecture providing the background needed for the time-period and setting of every story and some details about the author's life, the students were able to understand the plotline and events of the story. In addition, by beginning every class period with a twenty-minute installment of a Survey of American Literature, students were provided with the artistic environment from which the stories had developed, from Puritan times to the present, and began to see that a nation's literature is a product of its history at least as much as its politics.

Topics for these mini-lectures included:

The Puritans Find Their Voice
Writing and the American Revolution
The Emergence of American Literature
The Concord Group
Giants of the Mid-Nineteenth Century
World War I and the American Writer
The Jazz Age/ The Lost Generation
World War II and the Post-War Era
Regionalism and American Writing
The Civil Rights Movement and American Literature
Modern Trends and Future Directions

For some students who were not particularly keen on literature itself, these mini-lectures became the highlight of the class. So with the historical, artistic, and cultural background provided, understanding of the author's message could finally take place. The interpretation of what the author was saying to the reader through those basic events, though, was another matter.

INTERPRETATION

The barriers to INTERPRETATION of American literature were many for my students, and those that were able to cross this hurdle at first were few. The task required dealing with some of the students' basic assumptions :

1) All literature is considered art, art is meant to serve the state, and therefore all literature should be interpreted politically.

2) The author's intent should therefore either be ignored entirely or assumed to be a

criticism of the bourgeois. That anyone worth reading might have another message was unthinkable. These ideas had been reinforced by the textbooks and by previous literature classes, and by the intellectual climate in which the students had spent much of their lives.

Thus, separating the notions of author's intent vs. reader's interpretation became one of our biggest obstacles. The following illustration finally helped the students separate the two aspects of literature.

1) Is it fair for a modern man to say that a sonnet by Shakespeare reminds him of his girlfriend?

All the class agreed that that was indeed within the man's rights as a reader.

2) HOWEVER, does it therefore follow that Shakespeare had that man's girlfriend in mind when he wrote the poem, hundreds of years ago?

No, of course not, they replied! And THAT is the difference between an author's intent and a reader's interpretation. This was a very significant step in the students' ability to acquire a second literature, because by acknowledging that there are human universals which transcend cultures and time periods, the concept of Chinese uniqueness had to be challenged. The students had been taught that there is no common ground between American and Chinese culture, but when a short story like Sherwood Anderson's "Departure" could move them all with memories of their own first train-ride away from home, universals had to be faced. The acceptance of human universals is key to teaching American literature, since many American writers are intending to write about human nature, not just America.

The class finally accepted that the reader is free to interpret the piece in any way that he chooses but he must also consider the message that the author is trying to convey. A reader is at liberty, therefore, to see every piece of literature ever written as a Marxist diatribe if he so chooses (though that is a deadly dull way to approach literature), but he is not and cannot be free to assign Marxist motives to every author. When my students were finally convinced that Dickens was not necessarily anti-capitalist but most definitely anti-greed (witness the ending of *A Christmas Carol,* where Scrooge becomes not a socialist seeking revolution but a kind and generous banker and employer as opposed to a selfish and mercenary one), the battle was half-won.

A second barrier to INTERPRETATION was that the students were used to having it done for them, in the form of previous classes taught by politically motivated teachers

who presented literature in purely socioeconomic terms, and by textbooks with their own "interpretations" and notes. The book I mentioned earlier with its poor presentation of excerpts of all sorts of works yanked from their contexts was made even more unapproachable by a paragraph interpreting the work for each student BEFORE the story. Thus, the first chapter of the novel *Dombey and Son* was introduced by a polemic which ended "And now let us meet Dombey, the hard-hearted, cold-blooded capitalist." Such introductions are a deterrent to free interpretation, and they proved discouraging barriers indeed to the teacher and students.

It was also necessary to keep in mind that my students for the most part had spent the first ten years of their lives undergoing the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, during much of which interest in anything Western was not only illegal, but dangerous to oneself and one's family. Shakespeare and many other Western authors, musicians, and thinkers were completely banned at that time. Thus, it was not surprising that my students, who had come such a long way from that time due to their country's remarkable and courageous reforms, might still hold a prejudice against Western art and letters.

The Case for "Interference" in Literature Acquisition

A third barrier to the students' interpretation of American literature was the one which most closely resembles what we call in second-language learning "L1 interference," and that was, their own training in and knowledge of Chinese literature and the culture from which it has grown. Chinese literature has a long and august history, and has developed from a set of criteria and assumptions for style and meaning that are completely alien to those which govern Western writing. Space prohibits enumerating here the many points of contrast between Western and Eastern literature, and I am not a trained Sinologist. But the comments of my students and colleagues did give me a sense of the differences, just as a language teacher who teaches a monolingual class soon sees the pattern of its errors even without having extensively studied the group's native tongue. For example, some students at first complained that American style was plain and abrupt and therefore completely inferior to Chinese literature with its more subtle, circular, intricate ant yet the same time, simple shape.

It was difficult for the students to see that there was not a contest between Western and Eastern literature which could be judged by a single standard, but that in fact each had developed from its own unique and distinct aesthetic, and must be judged on that merit, to stand or fall by how it shines as an example of its own kind. This illustration

helped: it is fine to prefer apples to oranges, but silly to give as your reason that you hate oranges because they fail so miserably in their efforts to be red-they're not supposed to be red! Say rather, you prefer the taste of one over the other. So to prefer Eastern to Western literature is fine (many Westerners do too!) as a matter of taste, but to dismiss all Western literature as inferior because it does not fit the pattern of Eastern literature is false reasoning, and robs the reader of a broadening experience.

In the end, we were all challenged to redefine our very notions of the definition of literature, that it can sometimes be for some people an individual artistic expression, not a politically motivated commentary. Because literature is composed of language and is rooted in a given culture's aesthetic and history, it is as difficult to understand as a foreign language for members of another culture, even in translation! American students face that same redefinition process the first time they encounter non-Western literature or even American Indian poetry. My training as a folklorist included the redefinition of literature to include also oral literature of many forms, challenging the usual assumption about literature, that it must be written down. The students enjoyed these discussions on "what is literature?" and were more motivated to approach the stories which at first seemed so strange to them. Finally accepting the artistic pieces on their own terms, they began to consider the author's intent before applying their reader's interpretation, and were ready for the third stage of RESPONDING to each story on its own level, from their own experience.

RESPONSE

The last stage of the process of acquiring a second literature was to learn to respond to it, and here once again the students met with barriers initially. In the literature class under examination, the methods of response took two forms: written response in the form of essays, analyses, and reactions to the stories, and Oral response in the form of class discussion and group interaction about a given point such as character, plot, theme, style, or symbol. We also engaged in some passive interaction with the works including choral reading of poems and dramatic readings of small plays, and viewed some films based on literary works. In the case being presented in this article, both kinds of response were faced with instant barriers, barring the students from expressing themselves about the pieces they were reading.

ORAL RESPONSE

Oral response was inhibited by both cultural and political factors. Culturally, my students told me that for a Chinese student to volunteer to speak looks boastful to his classmates, and no one wanted to appear to be arrogant by saying too much. Often after a long silence where no one volunteered, calling on a student elicited a very thoughtful and interesting response, one he might never have shared voluntarily but which sparked the class to further discussion. The political barrier operated through a sense of fear on the students' part to appear to be appreciating Western ideas too much. In each class some student was appointed to listen to the comments of the others, ready to report to the political leaders any undesirable comments that might be made. Even a simple comment that one really enjoyed the story "The Bedquilt" for the way it reflected American life and values could be misconstrued and reported as inculcation on my part, or as "bourgeois liberalization" on the part of the student. So for the above two reasons, students were reluctant to voice very strong feelings or insights at first.

The problem of reluctance to share one's response, so vital to literature study, was best surmounted by splitting the class into small groups of four or five each, and giving each group a certain topic to cover, such as "What would you do if you were the main character," or "how does the author show character development?" After a time, one person from each group presented the group's findings, so that no one student appeared to be showing off or expressing only his own opinion. We then returned to the class discussion, often by having each student vote for their favorite among three stories, not risky because they have to choose one even if they profess to dislike them all, and the class enjoyed seeing how the vote came out and were interested in one another's reasons, some of them quite personal, some quite insightful, many times both.

WRITTEN RESPONSE

The same structural differences which made it difficult for the students to appreciate American short stories made it difficult for them to write about them in a way comprehensible to Westerners. That is, their first essays assumed the circular, indirect approach which characterizes correct Chinese writing style, but which when transposed into English looks as if either the author does not know what he is talking about, is confused, or is trying to prevaricate. Some of the students had taken an English writing course in the previous semester, and therefore had some training in correct English-essay

writing, but it did not come naturally to them.

Another problem for them was the open-style of the typical American literature exam, so different from the exam-style that they were used to. The students told me that generally their exam questions were aimed for a specific and singular response, and some of them had trouble with questions that had no right or wrong answer, but demanded only demonstration of having read and understood a story. For example, "What direction do you think American literature will take in the future?" "Which story do you prefer, 'The Use of Force' or 'The Family Meadow,' and why?" "What would you have done if you were the little boy in Mark Hager's 'Good Morning?' " However, once over the initial shock, the students came up with some beautiful and fresh answers to these questions. Untrained in the formulae and cliches that American students learn to trot out in answer to such questions, they offered their own unique perspective in lively terms. I remember vividly, for example, a student writing that she regarded the policeman in "After Twenty Years" as a man who stood out "like a crane among the chickens." Her delightful turn of phrase gave a new perspective on the story. Equally expressive was one young man's comment that the sad ending of Grace Paley's "Samuel" made him feel "grieved and peppery." These unique uses of language are a breath of fresh air to the essay grader.

Of course, not every piece of written expression was so accurate. The students were, after all, writing in a language that was not their first, and so language was a barrier to response just as it had been to comprehending the story on its first reading. Some interesting errors resulted. One student wrote that when he was reading Toni Cade Bambara's "Happy Birthday," suddenly the meaning of the story "hit me like a silver stagger," instead of the English expression he was shooting for, "went to my heart like a silver dagger." Another student said that the last part of "An Episode of War" made him "break out in a cold sweater," instead of "a cold sweat." Language teachers secretly enjoy such errors though, and they are easily corrected. Another persistent problem was the "phrase" of the week which had been taught them in another class appearing en masse in all of their essays that week. I found it hard to believe that EVERYONE felt James Thurber's "A Time for Flags" made them feel "caught between the devil and the deep blue sea," until it was revealed they had just been taught that old expression the week before.

This leads me to mention another common writing error which is related to responding to literature, one of language register. It was difficult for the students to differentiate

between the proper forms for oral and written language, as they were quite well-read in English, and had much more practice in reading than in speaking. They easily slipped into expressions that were either too formal or too informal. Some constructions best left to poetry such as "Oh" and "Til" and "Oer" cropped up in essays, as did some words best left to conversational English such as "that guy" in reference to the protagonist. Because we were focusing on literature appreciation AND language skills in that class, these writing errors were routinely corrected.

And finally, some errors must be blamed on the teacher, who apparently did not get the accurate information across in the lecture. For example, on one exam, the student identified "The Bay Psalm Book" (the first book printed in the New World, in 1640, being an English version of the Hebrew Psalms of the Old Testament) as "that book where King David translated those old poems into English." There were also some interesting responses to short identification of the following terms, though most students could identify them accurately : Leatherstocking Tales, Concord Group, Farmers' Almanack, Transcendentalism, Walden Pond. And to be honest, some errors contained more than a grain of truth. What modern reader could argue with a student that entitled one of his essays, "The Emergency of American Literature"?

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, many similarities and parallels exist between the acquisition of a second language and the acquiring of a second literature. There are at least two reasons for the comparison: both are language, and both are inextricably linked with the culture from which they come. If we accept the tenet that "language IS culture," then we will have to say further that "literature is culture times two," both because it is composed of language and because it reflects the values, scenes, and people of the culture which produced it. Therefore, the comparative literature teacher must keep in mind that the acquisition of a second literature will involve just as much "interference," both cultural and linguistic, as does the acquisition of a second language. Further study could reveal in more detail the specific interferences that plague different language and culture groups as they struggle to acquire the literature of another culture, just as linguists have begun to catalogue the specific interferences that a certain L1 learner has when attempting to acquire an L2. Just as many scholars can now state confidently what problems Japanese learners of English may encounter, comparative literature specialists should be able to draw up a list

of barriers that will probably create interference in the acquisition of the literature of the culture they are teaching. Another outgrowth of this comparison of acquiring a second literature to that of acquiring a second language is that perhaps more attention should be paid to the CULTURAL interference in language learning, not only the linguistic interference which has received the most attention in past studies. If indeed "Language IS Culture," this parallel merits further study, and should yield some interesting results.

(平成元年1月31日受理)